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ABSTRACT

The use of training groups in counselor education was evaluated by assessing trainees' (N=12) ratings of the usefulness of the group in terms of its objectives, their comments regarding the personal benefits of participating in the group, and their gains on the Tc and I scales of the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI). Results indicated that trainees found the personal growth and development aspects of the group most valuable. This was supported by significant positive changes on the two POI scales. (Author)

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USE OF TRAINING GROUPS IN COUNSELLOR EDUCATION

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A number of writers have stressed the idea that effective counsellor training programs should emphasize not only the intellectual, evaluative, and counselling skills development but also the personal-emotional growth of trainees (Brammer, 1973; Foreman, 1967; Maynard, and Long, 1976). They suggest that a training group experience adds an essential dimension to counsellor training by developing in trainees a greater degree of self-awareness, more effective relationship skills, and a more accurate view of themselves based on the feedback received from others. Additional arguments in favour of including some form of group experience in counsellor training emphasize the importance of group interaction in any school situation and the consequent need for counsellors to be skilled in structuring, observing and leading groups (Belkin, 1975; Donnelly, 1973).

In keeping with these views, the University of Canterbury's one year training program for school counsellors includes a training group as a mandatory experience for all trainees. The goals, assumptions and outcomes of this training experience are similar to those discussed in Adams and Hopson (1975). The specific objectives of this form of training are:

a. To provide participants with a basic understanding of group dynamics.

b. To provide participants with a knowledge of techniques for use in facilitating group interaction.

c. To enable participants to reach a thorough understanding of themselves and their impact on others.

d. To provide participants with an opportunity to engage in personal growth and development within a supportive environment.

The Training Group: Organization

The training group meets weekly for two hours during the entire academic year. The two hours are divided into two parts: an hour and a half of the actual training group followed by a half hour in which there is a more objective and didactic emphasis. This didactic session focuses on leadership techniques and the dynamics of what occurred in the previous hour and a half and includes discussion of a series of topics such as the rationale for the training group, definitions of group counselling, stages of growth in the group process, participants' fears and tasks in groups, structuring and leading a group, use of a co-leader, ethical considerations, and uses of groups in educational settings. Printed materials and relevant readings are assigned and discussed.

There are no formal written or graded assignments. However, trainees are required to keep a diary of their personal experiences and co-lead one session with another person during the third term.

a. Diary - This is intended as a personal subjective record of a trainee's reactions to and impressions of happenings in the group. It serves both to help trainees clarify or objectify something that happened in the group and as an account of their own development as the year progresses. For the leaders it serves as a check on how individuals and the group as a whole are reacting and as an indicator of important feelings or reactions that may have been missed or overlooked during the group itself.

Trainees are informed that the diaries are treated as confidential by the two staff who co-lead the group. The diaries are collected every four weeks and returned the same week, often with comments and suggestions from one or both of the group leaders.

b. Co-leading - Each trainee must choose another person with whom they will co-lead one group session. People may pair up in any way they wish and are encouraged to consult with staff regarding what they want to do. The didactic session is then devoted to giving co-leaders feedback on their style, use of technique and overall effectiveness.

The Training Group: Practice

The training group normally consists of two male staff and twelve counselling trainees. The two staff, both experienced group counsellors and practicum supervisors, function as co-leaders. The trainees' experience with group counselling varies widely. The number of males and females in the group varies each year but is usually predominantly male.

The design of the training group sessions includes the use of selected sensitivity and communication exercises, total group and small group situations, verbal and non-verbal interactions, structured and unstructured situations. Specific exercises and structured situations are used more frequently during initial group sessions than in later sessions in which the focus is on issues participants themselves raise. Exercises may still be used but only when relevant and appropriate. The emphasis of the group is on open, increasingly honest communication among members and self-assessment based on the comments of others. The co-leaders observe the same rules as trainees and direct, support, question, and challenge as they judge appropriate. How the group functions and what issues it deals with each week is determined by the whole group. While attendance is required, no one is compelled to be an active participant.

Evaluation

In 1977 the group consisted of one leader and twelve trainees, 7 female and 5 male. Trainees' experience in similar groups varied from none at all to a number of previous experiences. The group met for two hours on 24 occasions during the academic year. Evaluation of the effect of the training group was based on the following:

a. trainees' assessments of the relative importance of the group objectives.

b. their written comments regarding the personal value of the group experience.

c. a comparison of pre- and post-training scores on the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI; Shostrom, 1966), an instrument designed to measure aspects of self-actualization.

Approximately three weeks after the final group session trainees were asked to answer the following:

"Which of the four training group objectives has been most important or useful to you and which has been least important or useful to you?"

Responses are summarized in Table I and show that with one exception all participants indicated that the training group experience was most important or useful in terms of the personal gains or outcomes they experienced. The cognitive aspects of the training group, i.e., understanding group dynamics and leadership techniques, were consistently rated as least important or useful. These ratings lend support to the notion that counsellor training programs should emphasize the personal-emotional growth of trainees as well as their cognitive, evaluative and skills development.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The comments trainees wrote in support of their ratings of the group objectives amplify the importance of including a training group experience in counsellor training to promote the personal-emotional development of trainees. Typical of the reasons given for the personal value of the group experience were the following:

> "The group sessions made me think about myself in relation to others much more than I had been accustomed to doing ..."
>
> "For me this [personal growth] has been of immense value. I consider I have learnt more about myself and how I relate to others this year than any other in my life."
>
> "I have probably gained most in understanding myself better and how my behaviour affects other people, because before the froup, I had felt it was in some way selfish to think about oneself too much. I now realize how necessary it is to be aware of what I do, my weaknesses as well as my strengths, both for my own benefit and in my relationships with other people."

In contrast, trainees tended to see less immediate need or importance in gaining an understanding of group dynamics:

> "... I, as a teacher, had had considerable experience in this area."
>
> "... it didn't matter to me what stage the group was going through, as defined by someone else, what was important was what was happening to me."

Similarly, trainees attached less importance to gaining a working knowledge of leadership techniques:

> "... techniques of group interaction has been the one of least importance, in that it seems unlikely that I will be leading similar groups ..."
>
> "... it is the one aspect that can be picked up from books ..."
>
> "... learned that techniques are very secondary [to effective counselling]..."

Two comments regarding the value of the diary exercise suggested that the apparent difference in usefulness between the two cognitive objectives and the two personal growth objectives may have been reduced by keeping a written record of their impressions:

> "The diary, for me, was perhaps the most useful part of the whole process, because it allowed me time to think over what occurred in each session and gave me a concrete base for further reflection, growth and change. Although it was not stated as an objective, it certainly, for me, acquired that status ..."

> "I feel that keeping a diary was a tremendous help in perceiving, thinking, feeling, learning and questioning, and hopefully changing some of the negative things I wrote down, ..."

By keeping diaries trainees had to analyze the group process, theirs and others' participation, and the reasons for things happening the way they did, thus incorporating aspects of both sets of objectives.

The POI, a forced-choice inventory yielding twelve scale scores for various personal values and self-percepts, was administered to all trainees on the first day of their training and again immediately after training. The POI has been increasingly used as a measure of positive individual growth in training and group situations (Foulds and Hannigan, 1976; Mazer, 1969; Maynard, 1976), and in this case it was intended as a measure of the effect of the overall training experience, not just the training group. However, the trainees' very positive comments about the training group suggest that the group's effects would be strongly reflected in the POI scores. Only the Time Competent (Tc) and Inner Directed (I) scales have been considered here due to the high intercorrelations and item overlap on the other 10 scales. One-tailed t tests of significance of difference between correlated means were calculated. The results are presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The results show that at the conclusion of training both the Tc and I scales changed significantly in a positive direction. These gains indicated that trainees were living more fully in the present and were influenced more by their own motivations than external factors. These changes are reflected in the trainees' comments which highlighted their interest in the immediate, personal benefits of growth in the group situation rather than the accumulation of knowledge and skills to be used following training.

SUMMARY

Participants' ratings of the usefulness of the training group objectives, their comments on the value of the group experience, the positive changes on the Tc and I scales of the POI, and the co-leaders' personal convictions that the group experience is one of the most meaningful and valuable aspects of the counsellor training course lend support to the view that knowledge of counselling theory and skills acquisition are insufficient to meet the training needs of students. Some form of training group experience designed to promote the personal-emotional development of trainees would seem to be a generally desirable and valuable addition to any counsellor training program.

Two further questions arise out of this and previously mentioned studies, however. First, given the wide variety of group approaches, techniques and leadership styles currently in practice, which would be most effective in augmenting the goals of a particular counsellor training program? In the absence of supporting research it seems prudent to suggest that a group experience be made part of training

only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) the leader is competent, experienced and responsible; (2) participants retain an active voice in the structuring and running of the group; (3) a more objective and theoretical study of the group process is made part of training group itself.

Second, do the effects of a training group experience persist over time? No attempt was made in this instance to answer this question. However, Maynard (1976), in a one-year follow-up study of the effects of group training for counsellors noted that personal changes that are essential to effective counselling can continue and persist over time. Although it seems reasonable to expect that effects of the magnitude described by these trainees should also persist over time, more direct evidence is needed.

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TABLE 1

Trainees' Assessments of Training Group Objectives (n=12)

	Most important or useful	Least important or useful
Understanding of group dynamics	1	5
Knowledge of leadership techniques	0	4
Understanding of themselves and their impact on others	4	1
Opportunity for personal growth and development	10	0
Total	15[1]	10[2]

1 ... Three people indicated that two objectives were equally important or useful.

2 ... Two people did not indicate which objective was least important or useful.

TABLE 2

Means, Standard Deviations and t Values for Tc and I Scales of the POI (n=12)

	Pre-Training M	Pre-Training SD	Post-Training M	Post-Training SD	t
Time Competent (Tc)	18.67	2.02	19.50	1.93	1.96*
Inner Directed (I)	88.42	1[illegible]6	101.08	7.40	3.67**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .005$